

Hmong refugees may encounter lack of housing

By Vanessa Colón
The Fresno Bee

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Hmong refugees coming this summer to Fresno will have difficulty finding places to live because of a housing shortage, high rents and the lack of monetary assistance at federal and local levels.

Local officials expect many of the roughly 3,000 refugees coming to the Fresno area from the Wat Tham Krabok camp in Thailand will end up living with family and friends. It's a situation that might exacerbate overcrowded conditions for some Hmong who already live with large, extended families.

About 25 refugee families will begin arriving at the end of June, said Rev. Sharon Stanley, founder and executive director of the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries.

"As a county we are unprepared to take this position. We don't have any other housing for these newcomers, so the only option is to have them live with sponsors. ... There is going to be overcrowding at one- to two-bedroom homes or apartments."

"We can't build a house in 90 days," said Susan Bechara, CEO of House of Hope for Youth, a nonprofit organization that helps troubled youths, including southeast Asians.

The United States will accept about 15,000 Hmong from the camp beginning this summer. An estimated 5,000 are expected to resettle in California -- 3,000 of them locally.

More than 22,500 Hmong call Fresno home.

A task force of local government officials, Hmong community members and nonprofit groups including Catholic Charities and Refugee Ministries has met over the past months to brainstorm ideas to help the refugees make the transition to American life.

Housing has been a major concern for the task force.

Only about 4% of Fresno apartments are vacant. Builders are constructing fewer affordable apartments to meet the demands of low-income residents.

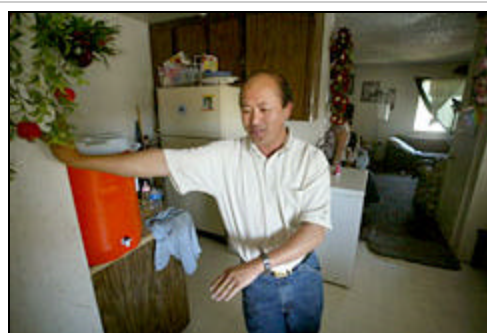
And refugees looking to the federal government for housing assistance will have to line up behind about 2,100 low-income families already on a waiting list for rent vouchers. An additional 17,000 Fresno County families are waiting for space in public housing.

Kee Yang, the patriarch of a family of eight, plans to squeeze about 30 refugee family members into the three-bedroom home he owns near Ashlan Avenue. His siblings and mother are among those who will be moving in.

"We are used to living that way. My family is big," Yang said. "We love each other so much. We are a close family."

All of the refugees must have sponsors lined up before they arrive in the United States. Many are being sponsored by relatives. If some of his relatives are not able to find apartments or jobs within a couple of months, Yang plans to ask other families in the area to take in some of the newcomers.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I will need to talk to my relatives to see what I can do to help."



Kevin Yang, once a refugee struggling to adjust to the United States, will be sponsoring five families, some of them relatives, when they arrive in Fresno from a refugee camp in Thailand.

Eric Paul Zamora / The Fresno Bee

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If you know of available housing, please call the Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries at (559) 487-1509.

The majority of sponsor families are not taking more than seven people, said Pai Yang, refugee resettlement director at Catholic Charities in Fresno.

Catholic Charities, a nonprofit group, is one of several organizations designated by the State Department to help the refugees.

Jim Devany, chairman of the Fresno chapter of the California Apartment Association, said the low vacancy rate in Fresno is a problem for all low-income families. The building trend favors upper-end apartments, he said.

Construction of affordable apartments and homes in Fresno is in the works, but much of it won't be ready for two years, said Michael Sigala, a manager in Fresno's planning and development department. One of the proposed projects is a 142-unit apartment community on the 1600 block of Church Avenue.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently awarded a \$20 million grant to Fresno Housing Authorities. The money is earmarked to build 153 units and improve 33 others at the Yosemite Village public-housing project in southwest Fresno.

Nationwide, there's a big demand for affordable housing, but the supply doesn't meet it, said Larry Bush, a HUD spokesman.

The city of Fresno has \$800,000 it could give to nonprofit organizations with plans for housing projects, Sigala said.

Fresno Council Member Mike Dages says the city will look into temporarily relaxing occupancy standards for low-income housing to help out Hmong families. The City Council could introduce a resolution so families won't have problems with their landlords if they let more people move in, Dages said.

"We are doing what we can. ... When we get an influx of 3,000 people, you can't do much in a certain time," he said.

Mayor Alan Autry wants to examine the housing situation more closely before changing the occupancy rate.

"I don't want to create a situation that will entice overcrowded conditions. That's not good for the homeowner," Autry said.

Rita Quintero, assistant director of the Fresno Housing Authorities Housing Choice Department, said the city does not have the authority to change occupancy standards in federally funded housing. HUD sets those rules.

Task force members, meanwhile, are trying to find affordable housing for larger families.

"The concern for overcrowding underscores the extreme need for us to identify affordable housing in the city. There's been a need for a long time in Fresno for more housing appropriate for larger families. ... We understand that it will be a substantial challenge," Stanley said.

Apartment rents in Fresno have increased by 20% in the past three years, Devany said. Rent for a two-bedroom apartment ranges from \$450 to \$950 a month depending on location, he said.

HUD has no money for additional projects such as Yosemite Village, Bush said.

HUD offers vouchers through its Section 8 program to low-income residents to pay a portion of their rent at privately owned apartments or houses.

About 2,100 Fresno County families are on a waiting list for the vouchers, Quintero said.

About 17,000 families are on the waiting list for federally owned public housing, said Susan Cuellar, assistant director of housing services for the Housing Authorities.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement will give each refugee \$400 within seven days of their arrival in the United States. They can spend it on housing, clothing or other needs, said Pai Yang of Catholic Charities.

Nonprofit groups such as Catholic Charities will distribute the money during orientations and teach families how to budget it, Yang said.

Kevin Yang, another refugee sponsor, said finding housing for his relatives wasn't a problem.

Yang, 42, manages an apartment complex at South Dearing Avenue in southeast Fresno. He has five apartments lined up for five Hmong families he expects will arrive in July. Yang, a broadcaster for Hmong radio station KBIF in Fresno, has five grown children and lives with his wife, Sandy.

He plans to pay half the rent for each of the families for two months. His concern is making sure the newcomers will ultimately be able to pay the full rent.

The unemployment rate in Fresno County is about 13.6%, according to the California Employment Development Department.

Yang has looked for jobs for some of the 38 refugees he will sponsor. So far, he's gotten three jobs.

Yang said: "I need to get them [some type] of job orientation. I want to help get them prepared."

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